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When Bad Leads to Good: Airplane Crashes and the Political Psychology of Stress

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Title: When Bad Leads to Good: Airplane Crashes and the Political Psychology of Stress

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Abstract. This article begins a series on research presented at the 1999 Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association. The article suggests some of the complexities in the construct of stress and applies them to research on the psychological aftermath of surviving an airplane crash.

The construct of stress is commonly employed in the realms of scientific and pop psychology. Most often, both realms consider stress as something noxious--to be avoided if possible. If stress cannot be avoided, one must finely hone skills to manage it. Reading scientific and pop psychology, one might easily conclude that one will sink and drown within the water of stress without the skills of treading such water. However, as with another water metaphor--viz., that the people are the sea within which the terrorist fish swims--there may be less here than meets the eye.

First, stress has conceptual difficulties. Stress may be something that effects a person, the effect itself, or the consequences of that effect. One might even find a research article in which stress is used in all three ways without an explicit warning to the reader--as when stress (food deprivation) leads to stress (hunger) and the latter stress also leads to stress (robbing a store to get money for food). (A similar problem exists with the behaviorist construct of reinforcement. Reinforcement is that which follows a behavior and increases the probability that the behavior will again occur. Reinforcement is also something one chooses before one chooses to influence because that something will increase the probability that the behavior will occur when that something occurs after the behavior. In both cases, there is infinite difficulty in ruling out all possible somethings occurring after a behavior that may affect that behavior's probability of occurrence.)

Second, theoretician and researcher expectations that stress usually induces noxious consequences can at least implicitly and covertly engender various demand expectations in theorist, researcher, and research subject. Then, stress--as something that effects, the effect itself, and the consequences of the effect--is more likely to be perceived as noxious. Thus are reports of well-functioning children who have engaged in sexual activity with adults treated with much professional distaste. And so are well-functioning adults who have lived through natural disasters. In the former case, moral and ethical issues flood methodological perusal, while in the latter case intimations of unconscious pathology and of seemingly healthy behavior really being residues and expressions of symptom substitution abound. In both cases, reports of no noxious findings may even be grounds for rejecting an article for publication, because the results are not significant!

The above issues are relevant in considering the results of a recent study that airplane crash survivors have been found to be in better "mental health" than non-crash air travelers in "the long run." The former were found to score lower on several standardized measures of emotional distress. In fact, similar results were found for shipwreck survivors--who reported strong positive changes in their outlook on life, greater self-esteem, and low scores on measures of post-traumatic stress--in a previous experiment. Reports of feeling some control over events related to the disaster seem to be a positively correlated factor in such reports.

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Although the above results may be a threat to huge audio, video, web, book, and workshop industries on stress management, the scientifically astute also may become the entrepreneurially creative. Preventive, inoculation, secondary, and tertiary intervention programs that are geared towards the noxious effects of stress may be complemented with newer programs geared towards stress's benefits. And once a research base includes examples wherein stress seems to have no effect, then all bases will be covered. (See Brewin, C.R., Dalgleish, T., & Joseph, S. (1996). A dual representation theory of posttraumatic stress disorder. *Psychological Review*, 103, 670-686; Capobianco, G., & Patelis, T. (August, 1999). Long-term psychological effects of airplane crash survival. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Boston, MA; Furnham, A. (1997). Lay theories of work stress. *Work and Stress*, 11, 68-78; Lazarus, R.S., & Folkman, S. (1986). Cognitive theories of stress and the Issue of circularity. In M. Appley et al. (Eds.). *Dynamics of stress: Physiological, psychological, and social perspectives*. (pp. 63-80) NY: Plenum; Scheuch, K. (1986). Theoretical and empirical considerations in the theory of stress from a psychophysiological point of view. In M. Appley et al. (Eds.). *Dynamics of stress: Physiological, psychological, and social perspectives*. (pp. 117-139). NY: Plenum; Westman, M. (1996). Implicit stress theory: An experimental examination of the impact of rater's stress on performance appraisal. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 11, 753-766.) (Keywords: Sequelae, Stress.)